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KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

THE FLIGHT OF TIME

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW



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NEW STORIES



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M o s c o w

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Nothing is dearer to me than my people and its destiny; than the wonderful Russian language and nature, which stirs the heart now by its force or its sadness; now by its tranquillity or its joy. Only as years pass do you begin to understand the power of this love and to regret that so little time has been left to you.

"A Tale of Forests"

A N I G H T I N O C T O B E R

I always find it easier to write in the country than in town. In the country everything seems to help you to concentrate, even the sputtering wick of the little lamp and the blustering wind outside, or that absolute silence which comes at times when the earth appears to stop and hang motionless in space.

And so, late in the autumn of 1945, I set off for a village beyond Ryazan, where there was an old country-house with an overgrown garden. Vasilisa Ionovna, a former librarian in Ryazan, lived there and I had often stayed with her when I wanted to work. With each visit I found the garden more neglected, and the house and its mistress noticeably older.

I left Moscow by the last boat. Brown banks stretched as far as the eye could see, and steel-grey waves, set in motion by the boat, washed

them intermittently. All night a red emergency light burned.

I seemed to be travelling alone—the other passengers rarely ventured out of their warm cabins except for an officer of the engineer corps, with a weather-beaten face and lively eyes, who kept limping round the deck and looking fondly at the banks.

They were waiting for winter: the trees were bare, the grass lay flat and the thick stalks had turned black. Chimneys in the villages along the banks dribbled smoke. The river was waiting too. The landings had been moved farther into the bays almost everywhere, and the buoys removed, and it was only by the dim light of the moon that our boat was able to continue on its course.

I got talking with the officer and we found to our mutual satisfaction that we were both bound for Zaborye. We would land at Navosyolki, cross the Oka by ferry-boat, and pass through the meadows to reach Zaborye. The steamer would arrive at Novosyolki that evening.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not going to Zaborye but to the forest rangers' station on White Lake, farther on," he explained. "But we go together as far as Zaborye. Though I've been at the front and seen plenty in my day, I'm glad enough not to have to make my way through those backwoods alone. I was a forest ranger before the war and, now that I've been demobbed, I'm going back to

the old place. Work in the woods—what could be better! I specialized in forestry. You come and see me, and I'll show you places that'll make you gasp. At the front I used to see them in my dreams nearly every night."

He laughed, and this made him look years younger.

The boat stopped at Novosyolki late in the evening. The landing was deserted except for a watchman with a lamp, and Zuyev and I were the only passengers to land. No sooner had we jumped with our haversacks on to the wet landing boards than the boat drew out, wrapping us in a cloud of steam. The watchman left at once with his lamp, and we were alone.

"Let's take our time," Zuyev said. "Let's sit down on those logs and have a smoke."

Everything about him told me he didn't want to hurry: his voice, the way he breathed in greedily the tang of river smells, his laughter when the boat's short blast at the other side of the turning was thrown back by the night echo and rolled on and on till it was lost in the woods beyond the Oka. He was overjoyed at finding himself again in the place he knew and loved so well.

We had our smoke and clambered up a steep bank to the buoy-keeper's house. I knocked on the window, and Sofron, the buoy-keeper, answered so promptly that it seemed as if he were

up and waiting. "The water keeps rising," he said after greeting me. "Two yards since yesterday. There must be heavy rains up there! Hear anything about it?"

"No, I haven't."

Sofron yawned. "It's to be expected with autumn coming. Well, let's get started."

The Oka seemed broader at night than in the day-time. The river water rushed past in a great sweep. Occasionally a fish splashed, making ripples which in the dim light were carried off by the current and stretched out of shape.

We landed and took a barely visible track that struck the road leading to the hayfields. There was a sweetish smell of withering grass and willow leaves in the air. It was quiet. The moon was setting, its light dimmed.

We had to cross a grassy island, four miles wide, then go by an old bridge over the sand-choked arm of the Oka. There, beyond the sands, lay Zaborye.

"It all comes back, you know," the captain said, all excited. "I haven't forgotten a thing. Those clumps of trees over there are the willows on the Prorva, aren't they? See! Look how heavy the mist is on Lake Selyan, and not a bird. I'm late for them, of course—they've gone. But what air! Distilled from the grasses. I've never known air like it anywhere else. Hear the cocks? That's in Trebutino. What voices! We're

a good couple of miles away and yet we hear them."

The farther we walked the less we spoke, and at last we fell silent. The night's gloom hugged the creeks, the black stacks of hay and thickets, and its hush infected us.

An overgrown lake stretched on our right, gleaming faintly. Zuyev's lameness made him a poor walker. We sat down to rest on the trunk of a willow-tree, blown down by the wind. It had been a familiar landmark for several years and lay almost hidden by a low growth of sweetbrier.

"Life is a curious thing," Zuyev sighed. "Not bad on the whole, not bad at all. I've grown particularly conscious of it since the war. It's a strange feeling. Laugh at me if you like, but I'm ready to spend the rest of my life growing some little pine-tree. I mean it. Crazy, isn't it?"

"Why, not at all," I said. "Have you a family?"

"No, I'm a bachelor."

We went on. The moon had sunk behind the high banks of the Oka, but it was a long time till dawn and the east was as purple as the rest of the sky. The going grew harder.

"There's one thing I can't understand—why have they stopped grazing the horses at night? They used to do it right up to the first snowfall. And now, look, there's not a single horse in the pasture."

I, too, had noticed that, but paid no attention. Indeed, the island seemed so desolate that we might have been the only living beings on it.

Then I saw the vague outlines of a broad strip of water. That was something new. I examined it and my heart missed a beat—could the Oka have overflowed that much?

"We'll soon be at the bridge," said Zuyev cheerfully, "and that's a stone's throw from Zaborye. We're as good as there."

We came to the bank of the old bed. The road dipped right down into the black water that swept past our feet, biting into the low bank. Heavy splashes could be heard here and there as clumps of earth dropped into the water from the undermined bank.

"Where's that bridge?" Zuyev asked anxiously.

There was none. It had either been washed away or lay some five feet under water. Zuyev flashed his torch. Sticking out of the turbid waves were some swaying bushes. That was all.

"I say," said Zuyev, puzzled. "We're stranded. So that's why the meadows look so deserted. We must be all alone. Let's decide what's to be done." He fell silent. "How about shouting?" he suggested after a pause.

But that wouldn't have helped in the least. Zaborye was too far away for anyone to hear us,

and anyway, I knew they did not have a boat there. The ferry-boat was a mile and a half or so down the river, near Desert Woods.

"We'll have to tramp it to the ferry," I said. "If only—"

"If only what?"

"Oh, nothing. I know the way." I had meant to say, "If only it still works," but I didn't. The odds were that the ferry-boat had been taken away, since there was not a soul in the flooded meadows. Vasily, the ferryman, was far too sensible and self-respecting a man to idle away his time on the river.

"Let's get going then," Zuyev agreed. "It's so damn dark."

He flashed on his torch again, swearing—the water had already swallowed up the bushes.

"It's no joke," he muttered. "Let's hurry along."

We went on. A wind rose. Blustering, it burst out of the darkness, spilling heavy granular snowflakes. The intervals between the splashes of the crumbling bank grew shorter. We stumbled along over hillocks and dry grass. We waded knee-deep across two gullies that were usually quite dry.

"The gullies are flooded already," said Zuyev. "It looks bad. But what I can't understand is why the water's rising so quickly."

It was really incomprehensible. Even during heavy autumn rains the water never rose so quickly and never flooded the island.

"D'you notice there isn't a tree here?" Zuyev remarked suddenly. "Nothing but bushes."

A well-trodden path led to the ferry. We recognized it by the mud under foot and the smell of dung. On the other side of the old river bed, the pine-trees boomed in the wind.

It was getting darker and colder. The water hissed. Zuyev flashed his torch again—the water was on a level with the bank and long tongues lapped at the meadows.

"F-e-e-erry there?" shouted Zuyev and stopped to listen. "Hey, there?"

There was no sound. Only the forest went on booming.

We shouted ourselves hoarse, with no results. The snow turned to rain. Big drops hammered all round us.

We took to shouting again, but heard only the same booming of the trees.

"There's no ferryman," said Zuyev resentfully. "Of course—why should he sit cooling his heels here when the island's being flooded and there isn't a soul on it? It's maddening—a couple of steps from home."

I realized that only a chance could save us—either the water would stop rising or we'd come

on a stray boat. What was most frightening was that we could not understand why the water was rising so swiftly. An hour ago there had been nothing to hint at this midnight disaster. We had walked right into it.

"Let's go along the bank," I suggested. "We might come on a boat."

We walked along the bank, skirting the flooded hollows. Zuyev had his torch on, but when it began to grow dim, he switched it off to save the last gleam of light for an emergency.

I stumbled against something dark and soft—it was a smallish stack of straw. Zuyev put a match to the straw and it burst into lurid, violent flames, snatching out of the darkness the turbid water, the meadows—under water as far as the eye could see—and even the pine woods on the other side. The tree-tops swayed and boomed unconcernedly.

We stood looking at the flames, all sorts of thoughts crowding into our minds.

My first feeling was one of regret at not having accomplished a tenth of what I had intended to do. Then of how idiotic it was to die like that because of our own stupidity—life held the promise of so many invigorating and delightful days, though rainy as this one, when the air, the water, the trees and even the grass had the smell of snow to come.

Zuyev must have been thinking along the same lines. Slowly he pulled a crushed packet of cigarettes from the pocket of his uniform coat and offered it to me. We lit up with a bit of smouldering straw.

"It'll be out in a moment," Zuyev said in a low voice. "The water's under foot."

I did not answer, for I was listening. Faint, short splashes, coming gradually nearer, could be heard above the booming of the trees and the lapping of the waves. I turned to the river and shouted at the top of my voice: "Ahoy, boat!"

"Coming!" a boyish voice called back from the river.

Zuyev hurriedly raked up the straw. A flame shot up, sending thousands of sparks into the darkness. Zuyev laughed softly.

"Oars," he kept repeating. "Oars splashing. You can't get lost like that at home—ever."

That "Coming!" stirred me deeply too. The flickering flame and the promise of help sent through the wild darkness made me think of some of the ancient customs of helping those in distress.

"Hulloa there! Come down to the sands," the voice from the river sang out and only then did I realize that it belonged to a woman.

We hurried down to the bank. The boat swam out of the darkness into the dim light of the fire and nose-dived into the sand.

"Hold on," said the woman. "I've got to bail out the water first."

She stepped out on the bank and pulled up the boat. I could not see her face. She had on a quilted jacket and high boots and wore a warm shawl on her head. "What on earth are you doing here?" she asked sternly, without looking at us.

She listened to our story, as she bailed out the water, silently and with apparent indifference.

"I can't imagine why the buoy-keeper didn't warn you. They've opened the sluices tonight and the island'll be under water by morning."

"And what in the world brought you into the woods at night, good fairy?" Zuyev asked playfully.

"I was on my way to work—from Pustyn to Zaborye," she replied drily. "When I saw a fire on the island and some people, I guessed that something was wrong. The ferryman's been off duty for the last two days—quite rightly too, because there's nothing for him to do here. He had put away his oars, and it took me quite a while to find them. They were in a tent under some hay."

I sat at the oars, but no matter how hard I pulled, it seemed as if the boat, instead of getting closer to the bank, was being carried off, along with the turbid water, the darkness and the night, to some black cataract.

We landed at last, stepped on to the sand, and climbed up into the forest where we stopped for a smoke. It was warm and quiet there with a smell of decaying leaves. The wind still surged and roared in the tree-tops to remind us of the bleak night and our recent danger. But now the night seemed wonderful, beautiful, and the face of the young woman, seen in the flare of a match as we stopped to smoke, was friendly and familiar. Her grey eyes looked at us shyly, and wet curls strayed from under her shawl.

"Is it you, Dasha?" Zuyev asked suddenly, under his breath.

"Yes." She laughed softly, as if at some secret of her own. "I recognized you at once, but I didn't show it. We've been expecting you ever since the war ended. We were sure you'd come back."

"Would you believe it?" cried Zuyev. "For four years I was at the front and pretty often it was touch-and-go, but now my life's been saved by my own assistant. I worked with Dasha at the forest station, you know—I taught her our forest lore. She was a weedy little girl then, but now she's grown tall and beautiful. She's also grown cold and reserved."

"Oh no, I haven't," said Dasha. "It's just that you've been away so long. . . . And you've come to Vasilisa Ionovna, haven't you?" She spoke to me evidently to change the subject.

I said I was going to stay at Vasilisa Ionovna's, and invited them both to come and get dry and warm in the hospitable old house.

Vasilisa Ionovna wasn't in the least surprised at our appearance. At her age, nothing surprised her and she put her own interpretation on everything.

"Sofron is an old blockhead, I always said so," she said after listening to an account of our tribulations. "That a writer couldn't see through him, right away! Even writers slip up sometimes, it seems. . . . Well, my dear," she said, turning to Dasha. "Congratulations. I'm glad your Ivan Matveyevich has come back at last."

Dasha flushed, snatched up a pail and rushed out, leaving the door open.

"Where are you off to?" cried Vasilisa Ionovna.

"To fetch some water for the samovar," the answer came from beyond the door.

"Girls are so odd nowadays," said Vasilisa Ionovna, without noticing that Zuyev was vainly trying to light up.

"Going off in a tantrum like that. . . . But she's a lovely girl, Dasha—the joy of my life."

"I should think so." Zuyev managed the feat at last. "A wonderful girl."

Of course, Dasha dropped the pail into the well. I was an expert at fishing pails out of that well

and so, with the help of Dasha and a long pole, I set about it.

Dasha's hands were icy with excitement and she kept repeating:

"What a funny woman Vasilisa Ionovna is. Fancy saying a thing like that!"

The wind had driven off the clouds. The stars glittered and twinkled above the black garden.

I fished up the pail and Dasha stooped to drink.

"I really cannot go in after that." Her teeth gleamed wetly in the darkness.

"Nonsense, of course you can."

We went in. The lamp was lit, a fresh cloth covered the table, and a portrait of Turgenev looked at us out of its black frame: a dry-point etching, of which our hostess was very proud.

THE MAGIC FLOWER

On my way home from Borovoye Lake last summer, I walked through a clearing in a pine forest. Grass fragrant with the scents of a dry summer grew abundantly everywhere, but it was thickest round stumps so mouldy with age that a slight kick was enough to knock them over and send up a spray of a dark-brown powder, like finely ground coffee. Then the exposed maze of passages, tunnelled by tree-borers, hummed with activity. Winged ants and flat black beetles with red epaulets like military bandsmen—aptly named “little soldiers”—ran hither and thither.

Presently a sleepy bumble-bee crawled out of its hive under a stump and, droning like an aeroplane, flew up, its sting drawn in readiness to plunge into the trespasser's forehead.

Billowing clouds looked so solid that it seemed as if you could lie on the dazzling cotton-wool piles and gaze down on the friendly earth with its woods, ripening rye and dappled herds.

In a field near the edge of the woods I came on some blue flowers, growing in such tight clusters that they looked like pools of dark-blue water.

I picked a large bunch of these flowers, which I had never seen before; they were like bluebells except that bluebells always hang their heads while the heads of these flowers were erect, and when I shook them there was a rattle of ripe seeds inside.

The path left the forest for the fields and then the song of larks, high over the rye, burst forth. It was as if they were thrumming on silver cords, throwing them back and forth, letting them drop, then catching them before they fell, so that the air vibrated with sound.

Two village girls were walking towards me along the path. They must have come a long way, for dusty shoes, tied together by their laces, hung over their shoulders. They were chattering and laughing but as soon as they caught sight of me they fell silent, tidied the flaxen hair under their kerchiefs, and pursed their lips primly.

How annoying it is when a pair of sun-tanned, jolly-looking girls with grey eyes put on such a forbidding air at the sight of you! But it's worse still if, when they have passed, you hear them giggling behind your back.

I was on the point of taking offence when the girls stopped and both gave me such a friendly

smile that I was quite flustered. There is nothing quite like the flash of a girl's smile that meets you on a lonely path far out in the fields. For a fleeting instant there is a gay and almost affectionate flicker in the depths of her eyes that leaves you transfixed, as if suddenly in front of you a bush of honeysuckle or hawthorn had burst into flower, all bathed in dew and fragrance.

"Thank you," the girls said.

"What for?"

"For meeting us with these flowers."

And the girls ran off, but as they ran they turned back several times and smilingly called, "Thanks, many, many thanks."

I decided that the girls were in high spirits and were simply teasing me. But all the same there was some mystery attached to the little incident, which baffled me.

At the edge of the village I met a neatly dressed little old woman in a great hurry. She was pulling a dun-coloured goat by a rope, but when she saw me she dropped the rope and clasped her hands.

"My dear, it's wonderful meeting you like this," she cried in a lilting quaver. "How can I thank you enough?"

"Thank me for what, Granny?" I asked.

"You think you're very cunning, don't you, pretending not to know," the old woman answered

and shook her head slyly. "As if you didn't know perfectly well. Anyway, I can't tell you, I mustn't, you know. Go your way, but don't hurry—try to meet as many people as you can."

Only in the village was the riddle finally solved. Ivan Karpovich, the chairman of the Village Soviet, was both strict and businesslike, but had a leaning for historical research on "a local scale," as he put it—in other words, for the history of his own region.

"You've found a rare flower," he told me. "It is said—though I'm not sure if I ought to tell you—that this flower brings girls luck in love, elderly people a quiet old age, and, in short, happiness to everyone."

Ivan Karpovich gave me an embarrassed smile.

"I, too, met you carrying this magic flower, and that should mean success in my work. That highway from the regional town to our village will probably be finished this year. And we'll gather the first harvest of millet—we never sowed it here before."

"I'm glad for the girls," he added after a pause. "They're good girls, our best vegetable gardeners, and they'll be happy all right. Happiness lies in work, you know, and in the prosperity of our land."

SWEETBRIER

During the night a fog settled on the river and swallowed up the buoys and beacons. The boat snuggled close to the steep bank and came to a standstill. Only the gangway creaked rhythmically as the sailors hauled the mooring-rope along it to make fast to an old broom bush on the bank.

Masha Klimova woke up in the middle of the night. It was so still on the boat that she could hear a passenger snoring in his cabin at the end of the passage.

She sat up in her berth. The fresh air coming through the open window brought with it the sweetish smell of willow leaves.

Bushes, shadowy in the mist, thrust their branches over the deck. Her first idea was that the boat had somehow made its way on land and was standing in a grove of bushes. Then the sound of lapping water reached her and she real-

ized that the boat must have stopped near the river bank.

A trill came from the bushes and then, after a pause, another. It was as if a note had been struck only to test the depth and responsiveness of the silence. The performer must have been satisfied, for a roulade followed, trilling into a short whistle. Dozens of voices joined the song and the thicket rang with the sudden silvery peals of nightingales.

"Hear that, Yegorov?" came a voice from above, probably from the bridge.

"Well, this beats even the nightingales on the Sheksna," said a husky voice down below.

Masha smiled and stretched out her hands in front of her. They looked dusky in the dim light, the fingernails gleaming palely.

"What's wrong with me, I wonder?" Masha whispered to herself. "What is it I want? I don't know myself."

Her grandmother's words that there was such a thing as a girl's inexplicable melancholy, came to her mind. "Nonsense! A girl's melancholy fiddlesticks! It's just that I'm beginning life on my own and I'm a bit afraid."

Masha had just graduated from the Institute of Forestry and was on her way from Leningrad to her place of work on the Lower Volga, to plant shelter belts for the collective farms.

It was, of course, understating things for

Masha to tell herself that she was *a bit* afraid. She was well and truly scared. She imagined her arrival at the place: her chief would undoubtedly prove to be a grim-faced individual all covered with dust. He'd be wearing a black jacket with bulging pockets and boots heavy with clay. He would look her up and down, noting her grey eyes (which to Masha herself always seemed like tin saucers) and her plaits, and he'd think: "That's just what we needed, a pigtailed girl who'll do nothing but quote her text-books. Just let the dry Astrakhanets start blowing, my dear, and none of your text-books will be much of a help to you here. . . ."

Her long trip gave Masha a chance to get used to the idea of the grim chief in his black jacket, and to lose her fear of him. But a feeling of depression still clung to her.

She did not realize that it was not exactly depression; it was just a feeling hard to analyze—a sinking of the heart before a mysterious but attractive future filled with the simple beauty of the earth, its rivers, the dark nights and rustling white willows.

Sleep would not come. Masha dressed and went on deck. Everything was drenched with dew—the wood of the rail, the wire netting below it, and the wicker armchairs.

"'Give me a draw, will you?' I said to the old man," a young sailor in the fo'c'sle was telling

somebody in a low voice. "He gave me the fag-end, so I took a draw and asked him: 'What are you doing here, in the meadows, in the middle of the night, Grandad?'—'Safeguarding the dawn,' said he and laughed. 'Maybe it'll be the last dawn in my life. That's something you can't understand—you're too young!'"

The sailors fell silent. Again the nightingales started singing in the bushes.

Masha leaned on the rail. Far away in the mist, cocks crowed in chorus. There must be a village there, beyond the fog. Was that the first cock—or the second?

Although she had read about it often, she hadn't the slightest idea when the first cocks crowed, and when the second.

It was her grandmother, widow of a river pilot, who had advised Masha to go by boat, and Masha was glad she had. The boat had first sailed the blue-black Neva, then crossed Ladoga Lake. That was Masha's first glimpse of its grey waters and the stone lighthouses on the low-lying bays. She saw the turbulent Svir, the sluices on the Mariinsky Canal, the banks overgrown with horsetail and the piers, each with its invariable batch of boys absorbed in fishing.

The passengers kept changing, and Masha thought them all interesting. At Belozyorsk a young flyer with grey temples boarded the ship. Probably he had been spending his holidays in

Belozyorsk with his mother, a thin old woman in a grey cotton dress who stood on the pier, crying softly.

"Now don't forget, Mother," he was telling her from where he stood on deck, "the fish I caught are hanging in the cellar, behind the staircase. Give one of the perches to Vaska."

"I won't forget, Pasha, don't you worry," said the old woman, and wiped her eyes with a damp ball of a handkerchief.

The airman smiled at her and kept joking, but he never took his eyes off her, and the muscles in his cheeks were working.

Then some actors came on board. They were a boisterous lot, cracked jokes, and made friends with all the passengers. In the saloon the piano, out of tune from the river fogs, jingled incessantly.

One of the actors, a brisk, elderly man with a pointed face, could be heard more often than the others, and Masha listened wonderingly to his songs. She had not heard any of them before. His favourite was a Polish song about a thief in love; because he could not steal a star from the sky for his sweetheart, the girl jilted him.

At the end of this song the actor would bang down the piano lid and say: "The moral of this song is clear: be kind to lovers. Now don't contradict—that settles it!"

Then he would straighten out his black bow tie and order some smoked fish and beer.

At Cherepovets several students of the Institute of Architecture boarded the ship. They were on their way back to Moscow from the Kirillo-Belozyorsk Monastery, where they had been for their summer practical studies. They had taken the measurements and made drawings of the old buildings.

All through the trip the students kept arguing about stone carvings, arches, Andrei Rublyov and the many-storeyed buildings in Moscow. Masha, listening, blushed at her ignorance.

When the students appeared on board, the elderly actor quietened down, stopped singing his song about the thief, and spent all his time on deck reading Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art*. When he read he would put on his spectacles, which made his face look kind and old. Masha thought that all those theatrical tirades were just an affectation, and that he was much finer than he pretended to be.

Now all the passengers were asleep—the airman, the actor and the students. Masha stood alone on deck and listened to the sounds of the night, trying to identify them.

A distant drone came from the sky and faded out: an aeroplane must be passing, high above the fog. Somewhere near the bank a fish splashed, and then came the sound of a shepherd's pipe. It

was so distant that at first Masha was puzzled by the lingering, pleasant notes.

Someone behind Masha's back struck a match. She turned. Behind her the young flyer was lighting a cigarette. He dropped the burning match overboard, and it fell slowly through the mist, with a halo of rainbow-coloured steam round the flame.

"These nightingales can keep you awake all night," he said, and Masha, without seeing him, felt that he was smiling in the darkness. "Just like in the song: 'Nightingale, nightingale, do not trouble the lads; let the soldiers have some little rest.'"

"I never heard such nightingales before," said Masha.

"Take a trip through the Soviet Union, and you'll find much more to wonder at," he replied. "You'll see what you never dreamed of."

"You feel like that about it because you're a flyer," remarked Masha, "and the land under your wings is constantly shifting."

"Hardly that," answered the airman and fell silent. "Day is breaking," he said finally. "Look, the horizon's growing pale over there." He pointed to the east. "Where are you bound for?"

"Kamyshin."

"Yes, there is a town by that name on the Volga. Hot spells, watermelons, tomatoes. . . ."

"And where are you going?"

"Oh, much farther."

The flyer stood leaning on the rail and watched the sky warming up with colour. The shepherd's piping came nearer and nearer. A wind rose, blowing the mist before it and carrying it in wisps over the river. Now the wet bushes and a hut made of willow branches were visible on the bank, and near the hut a fire was smoking.

Masha also watched the sunrise. The last star, like a drop of quicksilver, still glittered on the gold-tinted horizon.

"From today on," she thought, "I shall live quite differently. Until now I never really saw things—I was half blind. Now I'll notice everything, be awake to everything, remember and treasure everything in my heart."

The flyer glanced at Masha, then turned away. "She's far away," he decided.

But again he turned to look at her as he remembered a passage from a novel read many years before. There was nothing finer in the world, the writer had declared, than the eyes of children and girls in the morning, still deep like the night, yet shining with the dawn.

"Not badly expressed, that," the young man thought.

The steamer's weather-beaten mate, in tarpaulin coat, ran down from the bridge.

"Oh, you're up, too?" he called cheerfully to

Masha. "We'll stay here another hour—you could go and stretch your legs on the bank."

"That's a good idea," Masha said to her companion. "I'll go for a walk and pick some flowers."

"All right, let's go," the airman agreed.

They went down the rickety gangway to the bank. An old man came out of the hut, probably the one who safeguarded the dawn. The sun was rising over the mist.

The grass was a deep green, like still, dark waters. From it came the penetrating cold of night.

"What do you do here, Grandad?" the flyer asked the old man.

"I'm a basket-weaver," answered the old man and smiled rather shamefacedly. "I don't do much. Weave all kinds of baskets for the collective farm and so on. You interested in meadows?"

"Yes, we'd like to see them."

"You don't want much, do you?" the old man laughed. "I have lived here for seventy years, in this very meadow, but I haven't seen all there is. Take that path up to the black poplar—don't go beyond it, for the grass there grows taller than a man. You'd be so drenched you wouldn't dry in a day. And the dew—you can gather it in a pitcher and drink it."

"Have you had a drink of it?" asked the young man.

“ ‘Course! It’s far better than medicine.”

Masha and the airman moved slowly up the path. Masha walked to where the dead poplar was and then stopped.

On either side of the path sweetbrier bushes grew in high steep walls. The flowers were such a fresh vermilion colour that the early sunlight on the leaves round about them seemed cold and pale by contrast. They stood apart, as it were, from their bushes and hung in the air like small bright flames. Black bumble-bees, striped with gold, buzzed busily in the bushes.

“Cavaliers of St. George,” remarked the flyer.

The bumble-bees did make you think of the short ribbon of the St. George Cross. And they, too, bore themselves fearlessly, like tried and tested warriors, heedless of people, even angry with them.

In the occasional gaps between the sweetbriers the play of sunlight made fleeting patterns on the profusely growing grass and flowers. There was the blue, almost purple, candle-like larkspur, red and white clover, the blue tongues of crow-foot, Dahlias, snow-white common chrysanthemums, the wild Malva with its transparent rosy petals, and hundreds of other flowers which neither Masha nor the airman could name.

A quail rose noisily from under their feet. Hidden in a damp hollow tree-stump, a landrail screeched mockingly. Larks, quivering, soared

into the air, but their song, for some reason, seemed to come from the river rather than from the sky.

From the river, too, came the boat's sputtering call for Masha and the flyer to return.

"What shall we do?" asked Masha uncertainly, looking at the flowers.

She started quickly to pick whole armfuls of flowers. The ship siren sent forth a second blast, this time peremptory and slightly annoyed.

"Oh dear!" said Masha regretfully. Turning to where smoke from the ship's funnel curled over the thickets, she shouted: "Coming!"

They hurried to the boat. Masha's dress, dripping wet, slapped at her legs. Her plaits, which had been coiled in a knot on her neck, came undone and slipped down. The young man, walking behind her, managed to cut several flowering branches of the sweetbrier.

The sailors at the gangway looked at the armfuls of flowers and said:

"Well, well, stripped the meadow clean? Now there, Semyon, here goes!"

"Take the flowers into the saloon, for all the passengers!" called the first mate from the bridge and then shouted into the megaphone: "Slow ahead!"

The wheels turned heavily, the water churned under their paddles and the bank slipped away, its bushes rustling softly.

Masha hated to leave the bank, the meadow, the hut where the old basket-weaver lived. It was all suddenly very dear to her, as if she had grown up there, in the old man's care.

"How funny," thought Masha as she went up the companionway to the saloon. "I haven't the least idea where we are, or what the district or region is, not even the name of the nearest city."

The saloon was cold and clean. The sun had not yet warmed its polished wooden panels, the tables, and the walnut piano.

Masha began to sort out the flowers and put them in vases. The airman brought some fresh water from the lower deck and said as he helped her arrange the flowers: "My mother's garden in Belozyorsk is tiny but it has heaps of flowers, especially marigolds."

"Did you have a good leave in Belozyorsk?" she asked.

"Not bad. Read a lot, took an inventory of my life. Nothing much else to do there in Belozyorsk."

"What do you mean, 'took an inventory,' " she asked, surprised.

"I made a list of all I had seen, done and thought. Then analyzed it: had I lived my life in the right way, where had I made mistakes? Then I counted up the good things of life in the recent past."

"And how did the balance come out?"

"Everything is crystal clear now. I can go on with an easy mind."

"That's a new way of looking at things," said Masha and glanced curiously at him.

"Try it yourself," he suggested, smiling. "You'll be surprised to discover how full your life has been."

"Hear, hear!" said a familiar voice behind Masha.

She turned.

In the doorway stood the actor, a bath-towel flung over his blue pyjamaed shoulder.

"Hear, hear!" he repeated. "There's nothing like early morning confidences, when our thoughts are as clean as scrubbed hands."

"Chuck that!" said the flyer resentfully.

"You're right, it's all nonsense," conceded the actor. "Don't take offence. I happened to overhear your conversation and I want to add one detail, one incontrovertible truth, which I discovered late in life, I may say."

"And what is this great truth?" asked the young man.

"I do not like that tone of irony," said the actor in the exaggerated declamatory voice of an inexperienced reader. Then he laughed. "The truth is simplicity itself. Every day, at rock bottom, contains something good, often something poetic. When you take an inventory of your life, as you put it, whether you mean to or not, you

remember mostly its poetic and good parts. That is magnificent. Everything around us is full of poetry. Look for it. Those are the parting words of an old man, for ever and ever, amen. Don't contradict me. That settles it."

The actor went off chuckling and left Masha musing over the fact that everything in the world was very simple, but strange. That had not been as apparent in Leningrad, at the Institute, as it had become now, during this trip. Perhaps it was because her share of the poetry that lay at the bottom of life now stood revealed to her.

During the day a wind was always blowing down the Volga, so that waves of shining blue water kept passing the ship and moving on down the river. To Masha those waves were like the summer days that the wind seemed to be driving too quickly away from her, one after the other.

In the evening the wind would die down, and water would slide from darkness back into darkness, with a small glowing section rescued by the ship's lights.

Masha was happy, yet at moments her happiness was tinged with sadness to think that her new life, which had begun so well, might not go on in quite the same fashion.

In Kamyshin, with the wind blowing a yellow mist over the Volga, Masha left the steamer.

Both the airman and the actor went on to the pier to say good-bye.

Masha took an embarrassed leave of the flyer, who self-consciously returned to the boat and from the deck watched the actor saying good-bye to Masha.

The actor took off his hat, held Masha's hands, and looked at her with laughing, teasing eyes.

"You will be happy," he said, "but my happiness is greater than yours. That is because I am old."

"I don't understand," said Masha.

"It's obvious. I mean the happiness which is given to people who are no longer young," said the actor pompously. "The happiness of seeing tears in the eyes of Desdemona in love with someone else."

He dropped Masha's hands and, hat in hand, went up the gangway. The boat gave its third and last blast, and pulled out.

The wind from the river, laden with the smell of oil, lashed the face. A little old man with grey moustaches hung around Masha, offering to help her with her luggage, but she did not hear him and made no answer. So the old man sat down on a bench at the side, and lit a cigarette to give Masha a chance to pull herself together.

A day later Masha was far from Kamyshin, her home a railway carriage that had been hauled

to the steppes and set down near a pond with bare clayey banks. This little carriage housed the workers planting the forest belt for the collective farms.

Their chief proved to be neither grim nor dusty-looking. He was, on the contrary, very lively and jolly, but, like everybody else there, he was worried about whether the acorns sent would really sprout and what damage the dry winds, blowing from the southeast, might do. There, on the horizon, beyond the Volga, lay a glassy haze. The words "salt earth" were on everybody's lips. This "salt earth" was the greatest and most troublesome enemy of young trees—those naked patches cropping up in the steppes, that yellow clay whose cracks betrayed the snowy glitter of salt.

One day Masha took the airman's advice and made an inventory of her life. She found that it could be divided into three distinct parts—her life in Leningrad, the trip on board ship, and her work in the Volga steppes. Each period of her life had its good and, as the old actor had suggested, its poetic side.

In Leningrad there had been the room with its view of the sun setting on the Lakhta; there had been her friends, the Institute, books, theatres and parks. On the way here Masha had, for the first time, felt the charm of fleeting but deeply

moving friendships, and the enchantment of Russia's wide rivers. And now, in the steppe, she realized the great meaning of her work.

Somewhere at the back of her mind stirred the image of the airman, his embarrassed smile as he complained of the nightingales, and the expression of his eyes looking at her from the ship in Kamyshin. Then she recollected how the muscles in his cheeks had quivered in the same way as when he had said good-bye to his mother. What a pity it was that they had simply met and parted.

Masha was so full of her trip that once she even dreamed about it. She saw the dense growth of sweetbrier bathed in dew. Dusk had fallen, and a delicate crescent lay on the dark threshold of night, like a silver sickle forgotten by reapers. She felt so happy that she laughed out loud in her sleep.

The newly planted trees were like a shallow green river flowing over the hills and far away into the arid steppes where a brick-red dust swirled above the broad paths.

There was much to do. The earth between the young oaks had to be loosened, the acacia planted. Masha put her whole heart into this work, feeling a tenderness for the young trees.

Tanned a nut brown, her plaits bleached by the sun, she looked like a girl born and bred in the steppes. Her dress, hands, and every-

thing about her smelled strongly of wormwood. Even Narzan, the shaggy black watchdog who stayed behind to guard the carriage, smelled of it.

Styopa, the chief's son, a boy of seven, kept Narzan company.

All day long they sat together in the shade of the carriage listening to the whistling of gophers, and of the wind in a crooked wild pear-tree which echoed as if it had been cast in bronze.

Towards the end of the summer the trees were attacked by gophers. They burrowed holes near the trees and rolled about in them to rid themselves of fleas. A distress-call was sent to Stalin-grad for the "gardener" plane to come and scatter poisoned oats in this belt.

One evening as Styopa sat on the steps of the carriage peeling potatoes, Narzan raised his head and barked. A small plane, chugging lazily, was flying low over the steppe from the direction of the setting sun.

It flew over the carriage, made a sharp turn, landed on the dry grass and, after a short run, stopped.

The pilot came out of the cockpit, taking off his helmet as he walked up to the boy and the dog. He was still a young man though his temples were greying. On his jacket Styopa saw Order ribbons.

Narzan, instead of barking at the pilot, crawled under the carriage and began to growl timidly.

"Hullo, boy," said the pilot, sitting down beside Styopa on the steps and lighting a cigarette. "Is this section No. 15?"

"It is," said Styopa timidly. "Do you want No. 15?"

"Yes. I'm going to kill off the gophers."

"What a lot of Orders you have," said Styopa. He paused, then went on: "But you're going to poison gophers. We thought they'd send us a student pilot."

"I asked to be sent here, my boy," said the pilot and was silent. "Does Masha Klimova work here?"

"Of course," answered Styopa, squinting at him. "Why?"

"Where is she?"

"Over there, in the woods." Styopa waved a hand towards the young plants.

"Some woods!" laughed the pilot. He got up and went off in that direction.

Styopa looked after him. It was growing dark, and it was hard to see the steppes, but Styopa could see Masha walking home. The pilot was walking quickly to meet her, but Masha stopped before he came up and hid her face in her hands.

Night fell. Above the pond in the steppes a lone star gazed into the black water from its great height.

"Now, why did Masha hide her face in her hands?" Styopa wondered, and then he repeated his father's words when he referred playfully to Masha: "Such a funny girl!"

And all night long Narzan growled from under the carriage at the plane resting peacefully on the dry, warm earth.

1951

THE FLIGHT OF TIME

Vladimir Lavrov, a Moscow painter, was commissioned to paint several landscapes of the Volga. He readily agreed but, with his usual dilatoriness, he took the whole summer to get started. It was not till September that he went by boat to the Volga.

The broad-funnelled steamer sparkled, its portholes polished till they were like crystal. Engines throbbing, the ship steamed smoothly and steadily on, carrying its lights and a thronged deck of well-dressed passengers past suburban woods and creeks over which a cool sunset was fading. The woods were already russet and gold. Signals flickered in the tremulous light of the autumn evening.

Though well advanced in years, Lavrov was a shy man who found it difficult to make friends with his fellow-passengers.

What interested him most in people he met was whether or not they were paintable. On board ship he had singled out two people—the

pilot Sasha, a young girl, and one of the passengers, a clean-shaven elderly man with kind, heavy-lidded eyes, a well-known professor of history.

They crossed the Ribinsk Sea at daybreak. Lavrov came out on a deserted deck, wet with dew. Small waves murmured as they rolled eastward towards a hazy dawn which predicted bad weather for the day.

The professor also had come up on deck, and he stood leaning against the rail, collar turned up, and hand clutching his black hat that old men are so fond of wearing.

Sasha ran down the steep ladder to the deck. She wore a dark uniform, leather gloves and a beret under which she tucked her hair. She had just been relieved of her night watch, her cheeks glowing and her lips chapped.

"Good morning," she greeted Lavrov, smiling. "Admiring our sea?"

"Rather! I can hardly believe it's man-made."

"I was born here, in Mologa. When I was a little girl we used to go mushrooming right here." She pointed to the waves, rosy with the dawn. "And that wasn't so long ago, either—this sea is younger than I am."

"Historical records cannot keep pace with the rush of events," the professor commented, pulling his hat down almost to his ears. "They overshoot, cross and outstrip our meticulous histori-

cal thought. It'll take a whole army of specialists to express this telescoping of time in terms of science."

"But surely there is such an army already in being?" asked Lavrov.

"Yes," the professor said, smiling. "There certainly is and it's now deploying for action."

Near Kineshma the steamer overtook a long string of rafts.

A gusty wind hurried light ragged clouds across the sky, their shadows fleeing over the river and its wooded bank which dipped sandy cliffs into the water. Following hard on the shadows were flashes of sunlight that made everything blaze and glitter. A flock of river gulls would burst out of the shade in a flash of white, and dive back into the dusk; then a flag on a distant house—probably the Village Soviet—would flame up. The next moment the green of the pines seemed to sparkle in the sunshine as if they had been drenched by a summer down-pour; then the pines would stand enveloped in a dusky green pall, the sound of their low boom reaching the ship.

The steamer's wake splashed over some passing rafts. Young women, holding boat-hooks, stood on the huge pine logs fastened together with steel hawsers. They shouted something, splendid teeth flashing in their sunburned, laughing faces; but the wind carried off the sound and

filled out their coloured kerchiefs and skirts, revealing bronzed legs.

Sasha was on the bridge. "Ahoy, there. How goes it?" she shouted through the brass megaphone.

"F-i-i-ne!" the raftswomen shouted back in chorus, waving their handkerchiefs.

"Where to?"

"Down to Stalingrad. Good-bye. Be seeing you soon."

Lavrov gathered that they regarded Sasha as one of their own, and that she must be well known all along the Volga—naturally, for women pilots were still rather few and far between there.

That night Lavrov complained to Sasha that, much as he would have liked to paint that scene—the girls on the rafts on a windy day, with its shifting lights and shadows—they had swept past so quickly that he had not even managed to sketch it.

"Couldn't you have stopped the steamer for a moment?" he said jokingly.

"No, Vladimir Petrovich. How could I?"

"How could you! Oh, you machine-minded people! You don't care two straws about beauty!"

"That's not true," Sasha retorted hotly. "We do care about beauty. But you must understand our point of view too."

"What is there to understand?"

"Well—imagine the traffic all over the country—how complex it is. The routes of trains, steamers, air liners—a huge network with one timetable depending on the other. They must run like clockwork if life is to go on smoothly and steadily. That's beauty for you, too."

"Hm, there's something in that," Lavrov agreed. "I hadn't thought about it."

They steamed past gilded hills rising steeply on the right. Electric pylons stood half-sunk in the russet-leaved tops of the trees. Lavrov fancied—possibly because of the blue flashes of the discharges—that the tautly stretched wires had a bluish tinge from the electric current they carried.

The left bank receded into the mist which sometimes was rosy or golden, sometimes blue or lilac tints prevailed; at other times it was a huge blur of purple or ochre. The painter knew that the effect was due to forests, shadowy in the mist, or clouds tinged by the setting sun, or steep banks looming up, or the distant buildings of a fog-enveloped city.

One day Lavrov was seated at his easel on the upper deck near the captain's bridge, where passengers could not disturb him. With broad quick strokes he sketched this hushed world of air, mist, many-hued waters, and golden vistas.

Sasha was on duty on her bridge. She cast uneasy glances first at Lavrov and then at the

sky, vexed that the dusk was falling so quickly, erasing all that brilliance and leaving a monotonous grey. "Oh, he's so slow," she thought. "He'll never finish it."

She pulled a rope and the steamer's siren gave a long drawn-out blast to warn a boat crossing her course.

As the steamer came nearer Lavrov saw a young woman, standing gazing at the steamer, her jacket unbuttoned and bunches of autumn leaves in her hands. A tanned young man rested on his oars and also followed the steamer with his eyes. The reflection of the leaves rippled in the water.

The woman—a shimmering cloud overhead that resembled a cluster of grapes—and the scene as a whole—seemed to him so tranquil, so full of the peace reigning in his wonderful country, that Lavrov could not help a sigh and an angry look in Sasha's direction.

For a moment he seemed to wait, brush in air, for her to stop the steamer, but Sasha's face had a set, almost hard look.

The boat dropped quickly behind, rocking in the dusk, the leaves catching the last ray of the sun. Darkness could not blot out their golden glow.

Angrily, Lavrov snapped his paint-box shut and went down to his cabin, with a sidelong

glance at Sasha as he passed the bridge. She flushed and looked away.

"You won't get away with that," thought Lavrov. "We'll have it out yet."

Down in his cabin he thought seriously about what he would say to her—a real indictment it would be. But he did not see Sasha that evening—she must have been sleeping after her watch—and his indictment turned stale overnight, and seemed positively stupid. What did he want—life to stand still for him? It never would. It would be for ever carrying its waters in a broad stream to the horizon that we call our future. Once you fall behind, the stream fades from sight and you are left stranded. "She is right, after all," Lavrov decided at last. "I have no right to be angry with her."

Strings of lights glittered in the autumn darkness. Exhaling a moist freshness, the black giant of the Volga flowed in glassy waves into the night, pulling those lights into fantastic shapes and then splintering them.

* * *

In December Sasha went to the annual exhibition of paintings held at the Tretyakov Gallery. It was evening. Snow was falling and the windows seemed ablaze with a host of tiny warm candles, lit for some winter holiday.

Sasha passed quickly through the almost

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empty halls, looking for Lavrov's picture. She saw it from afar and it made her catch her breath with excitement.

What power this taciturn, even clumsy man must possess to have been able to catch that wonderful evening on the river and see in it a world more than she herself had done. What was that power? Was it talent? Or love for his country? Or both?

The longer Sasha stood looking at the picture the greater was her desire to thank Lavrov. And perhaps to touch reverently his slender, paint-stained hands.

"How could he have painted that boat and the woman with the bunch of autumn leaves?" thought Sasha. "I did not slow up the steamer then."

She stood looking at the picture from afar, and suddenly she was overwhelmed with a feeling of joy. "I'm glad I've come," she thought. "Everything is so lovely. Even this fluffy snow that keeps falling lazily and brushes against your face is lovely. Everything is lovely, absolutely everything."

THE TREASURE

This entire stretch of wooded land north of the Oka has always been called "dremuchy."*

Through these forests, for miles on end, Arkady Gaidar and I had roamed, but that was years ago, in the early thirties.

More than once in our wanderings we spoke of the old popular expression, "dremuchy" forest. The aptness of the Russian language delighted us, for truly the dense thickets seemed to have been lulled to sleep. A brooding hush had settled not only on the forest, but on lakes and sluggish rivers with their rusty waters. Their banks were lined with the *lychnis*, otherwise known as "sleepy-head," a plant well suited to the forest thickets, for its head nodded languidly right down to the ground.

* *Dremuchy*, meaning "dense, primeval," is from the same root as "dremat," to drowse.—*Tr.*

There were large tracts of wasteland, patches laid bare by forest fires, tangles of branches blown down by the wind. Cold vapours curled over the swamps. Clouds of mosquitoes and gad-flies hummed in the air. Areas of the forest had been laid completely waste by the caterpillar; others were thickly meshed with spiders' webs.

We often voiced the hope that the Soviet Government would soon find time to tackle these neglected parts and that man, at long last, would take in hand the natural wealth that was going to waste.

In a forest clearing known as the "Government Ditch" there was an old one-roomed cottage which stood on the bank of a shallow canal overgrown with spear grass—that same "Government Ditch" which gave its name to the clearing.

The canal had been dug in the sixties of last century to drain the Great Swamp, but the engineers must have done their work badly, for the swamp did not dry up. The canal was a reminder of the failure of the local land reclaimers.

In summer the cottage was occupied by tar-distillers—old man Vasily and his grandson Tisha, a boy of about nine.

Once we stayed overnight with Vasily. Evening was approaching and a dry, yellowish mist hugged the clearing. Grasshoppers chirped and hopped nimbly among the resinous tree-stumps. A murky sun was sinking behind the coppice. In

the canal minnows swished here and there, and water rats squeaked.

On the wall of the little cottage hung a faded lithograph, "The Taking of the Winter Palace."

We had brought along some rusks and sugar, and Vasily told Tisha to get the samovar going.

At tea Vasily said, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve:

"Our work has one good thing about it—you live to a ripe old age. We tar-distillers are healthy folk, because we're soaked in tar. No sickness can get at us—even the mosquitoes keep their distance. Of course, if you take a long view of it, there's nothing to the life. Nothing but tar and coal, wastelands and smoke. That's it—wastelands!" he repeated and gingerly picked up a snow-white sugar-lump with fingers that were black with tar. "This has always been a god-forsaken hole. The Government seems to have forgotten us."

"Maybe our turn hasn't come yet," suggested Tisha.

"Now, if Moscow'd only send for me and ask my opinion, I'd have plenty to tell them! How about arranging it, Arkady Petrovich? A little trip to Moscow, eh?"

"That isn't so easy," said Gaidar. "And then, here you're a fire-eater, but in Moscow wild horses couldn't drag a word out of you."

"That's not true," Tisha countered. "Grandad's terribly brave."

"Good for you, Tisha! Stand up for your grandad!" shouted Vasily.

"And what would you tell them in Moscow?" asked Gaidar.

"First of all about our forest. What a forest it is! You climb up some hillock at sunset and there you can see the mist rising and the forest stretching away to the sky like a regular sea. It's enough to make your heart miss a beat. There's too much dead wood in the forest, though. Tangles of rotting wood, a breeding ground for all sorts of worms that go and gnaw at the trees. And as for the lake—why it's so chock-full of fallen oaks you can't even float a bit of a boat without it getting stuck. And under those oak-stumps, hiding like robbers in caves, you'll find black perch, as big as this tray!" And Vasily pointed to the metal tray on which the samovar stood wheezing a plaintive song.

"There's no end of peat in the swamp! The rivers teem with the musk-rat, the otter, the ide. But the forest isn't everything. Take a look at the water-meadows lying for hundreds of miles along the Oka. In flower they smell so you can't get your fill of it. But even the grass in the meadows, I notice, is getting worse. High weeds, hawthorn, young willows are gaining ground. And so our region's going to pieces, as they say.

But once put your hand to it and it would be a gold mine."

We woke up early the next morning. It was so quiet you could hear drops of dew dripping from the roof on to an overturned pail.

The sun had just risen. It was no longer murky, as it had been the evening before, but bright, as you feel after a good night's rest.

We walked along the canal looking for a place deep enough for a dip.

"Stop," said Gaidar suddenly. "What's that over there, beyond the bushes?"

"That" proved to be a girl about seven. Catching sight of us she hid behind a bush of spurge laurel. *She boy her*

We went up to her, and there she was in the grass looking up at us with big, frightened blue eyes. Beside her was a pitcher of milk, covered with a bit of clean cloth.

The girl wore a faded yellow shawl and a long black skirt, evidently a "hand-me-down" from an older sister.

"Now who might you be?" asked Gaidar.

"I come from Shamurino," said the child quickly and jumped up, almost tripping over her skirt. "Our village is out there, across the canal. Nine houses in all."

"Ah, you're Tisha's sister."

"Yes, I'm Liza. Tishka goes to school in winter, he is in the fourth form."

"And you?"

"Not yet! I'm too little. I bring the milk over every morning. And, please, who are you?"

"Bold travellers," said Gaidar. "We're searching here for the burning white stone that has a magic treasure buried under it. Have you seen the stone?"

"No, I haven't," she answered, flustered. "Maybe somebody else has, but not me. What does it look like?"

"You'll know when you grow up."

That day we left the clearing. Again in front of us lay the lonely forest paths, slippery with russet pine needles. The crowns of the pines swayed rhythmically, clouds faded into the sky, and woodpeckers, with angry sidelong glances at us, pecked at the dry trees.

* * *

All that was twenty years ago. These years have been like centuries—not a single corner of our country is left unchanged.

Nature is being taken in leash. Under our very eyes new seas and canals, new forests and vegetation are being created. Even the climate is being altered.

Naturally I was eager to find out what had happened to that wooded region beyond the Oka, where Gaidar and I had once roamed. It was late evening when I came on a lorry to the float-

ing bridge. It had just swung open to let through a string of barges being towed upstream by a tugboat that slapped its paddles hard against the water. The decks of the barges were packed with new Pobeda cars.

I climbed out of the cabin and took a deep breath of the unusually fragrant air coming from across the river.

"That's clover," said the elderly driver. "All the meadows here are now sown with clover."

Soon we were in those very meadows. I could sense their damp cool grass, although in the dark I could not see it. Occasionally a star shimmered on the earth but you could not tell whether it was some little meadow pool or simply the heavy dew that held a reflection.

"There's a Tikhon Chernov hereabouts whom you're sure to meet," said the driver. "He's Chairman of the local District Executive Committee. Ever heard of him?"

"No."

"He's quite out of the ordinary. Belongs to the new formation." (My driver liked to express himself with scientific precision. He called his motor an "internal combustion engine," and referring to plants he would say, "the flora was making visible progress.") "So you haven't heard of Chernov?"

"I haven't been in these parts for twenty years. How could I?"

"That is a considerable period of time," the driver agreed, and added: "Well, then, you'll never recognize these parts. Today you'll find in our meadows a complete array of machines. A real exhibition of marsh rototillers, bush cutters, ditchers, grass sowers. All the meadow machinery in existence is collected here. That's what I call the reconstruction of nature!"

"But where shall we spend the night in Polyani? It's rather late," he said after a pause.

We decided to stop at the first house showing a light.

A house with two gleaming windows stood right at the beginning of the village.

"Why, that's the school!" cried the driver happily. "A teacher lives here. She's also, they say, a girl of the new formation."

We knocked. The door was opened by a girl with long dark plaits: she said we could spend the night in the empty schoolhouse, and offered us some tea.

We refused the tea, but she took us hospitably to her room. I glanced at her in the light and it struck me that I had yet to meet a sweeter face. Her shy eyes, a deep blue, were particularly beautiful.

On the table stood a photograph of Gaidar. I looked intently at the girl.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

The girl glanced up and shook her head.

"Do you remember Gaidar?"

"Of course!" the girl exclaimed. "Wait a minute! Then it was you who were with him at the 'Government Ditch.' What a funny coincidence!"

"And you must be Liza?"

"Yes, Liza. I'll put on the kettle—we must have a talk. And my brother ought to be coming from the District Executive Committee."

"Not Tisha?"

"Why not? He's the chairman."

"So we struck the right spot," said the driver triumphantly.

"How wonderful!" said Liza, setting the table and laughing spontaneously. Her cheeks were flushed and her breath came quickly. "You know, Gaidar wrote me later from Moscow. About the magic treasure. I was little then and I couldn't read, so Tisha read the letter to me. What I liked best in it was: 'We did not find the treasure, although we inquired of every passing bird and beast. And then we came upon a little grey-haired old man, picking mushrooms. He assured us that there was no treasure buried under a white stone, and never had been. He said that there is only one real treasure in the world—a good heart. So, Liza, try to have a good heart. And read a lot, too.' When anything goes wrong I reread that letter and I feel at peace with the world again."

"A kind word has a wholesome effect on the mentality," remarked the driver.

"And how is Vasily? Living?" I asked.

"No, he's dead."

"He kept insisting that tar-distillers lived for ever."

"That was just a saying of his. According to him there was no place in the world as good as his birthplace. He always said the land here was a gold mine. If only he could see it now. They're uprooting bushes on the meadows, ploughing and fertilizing the land and sowing it with good fodder grasses. You wouldn't recognize the meadows now: a veritable flower garden. We have a hydro-electric station and the forests are well taken care of—all the dead wood removed, anti-fire passages cleared, and the vacant land planted with pine. A forest has already shot up on the 'Government Ditch'—furry pines as tall as a hut and so dense you can hardly get through them."

"Thanks to Tikhon Ivanovich," the driver put in.

"Yes, Tisha works hard," Liza agreed. "He's an engineer in land reclaiming. And I'm a teacher. I teach Russian and literature."

We stayed a long time talking, but still Tisha did not turn up. I saw him next morning at the District Executive Committee office, a light room with the floors drying in the sun after a good scrubbing. The windows were wide open and beyond them the meadow faded in a haze. Here and there lakes glistened like pieces of mica.

I did not immediately recognize Tisha in the thin man with the Order of the Red Star pinned on a military jacket without the shoulder-straps. He was neatly dressed and clean shaven, although evidently he had worked almost all night.

Tisha (he was still Tisha to me, although he was Tikhon Ivanovich to everyone else) fought shy of the subject of how he, a boy tar-distiller had become engineer and Chairman of the District Executive Committee. He parried my questions by saying: "What's so unusual about it? There are lots like me. . . ."

A tall freckled man, a driver, put his head in through the open window.

"Tikhon Ivanovich," he pleaded. "Let's get started. They're tired of being caged up and they'll just gnaw the bars to bits. You ought to see their teeth."

"They won't gobble you up—don't worry!" said Tisha. "We'll start right away." Turning to me he explained: "We've begun to breed beavers on the White River. They've just brought up a new batch of them from near Voronezh. Want to come along? You'll see the old places."

I agreed and we climbed into the lorry. The beavers in the boxes kept moving restlessly and growling. At the end of the village the lorry plunged into the forest and went uphill along a hard gravel road.

Twenty years ago the place had been piled with a tangle of fallen trees; now there was a dense undergrowth of juniper and nut-trees.

Breathing was a sheer delight. Perhaps that is why Tisha said unexpectedly: "‘O realms of woodland that breathe like gardens blown,’—they do!"

We pulled up near the hydro-electric station on a little forest river. High up, over the pines, the afternoon wind was blowing and the forest surged and boomed like ocean surf, but down below it was calm for the wind never reached the ground.

The hydro-electric station worked almost noiselessly. All you could hear was the faint splash of water from the dam and, from inside the building, somebody singing the air from *Sadko*—"Countless are the diamonds in the caves. . . ."

I had never see such a small hydro-electric station. Built of pine logs, it was spotlessly clean and cool inside, and smelled of resin. A nut-tree thrust its branches through the open windows. A bronzed lad in a sports shirt was sitting on a stool.

"Our electrician," Tisha said, introducing us.

"I've been singing all the opera airs I know," he said, embarrassed, "just to pass the time."

"The Bolshoi Theatre at home," grinned Tisha and turned to me. "This is our own work, done by local collective farmers—a beauty of a station.

Soon we'll start work on a big inter-collective farm station near Linevoye Lake. It will burn peat, and then we'll have electric ploughing, electric milking and electric saws at work in the forest."

I had been at Linevoye Lake before and I found it hard to imagine a power station being built there in a short time. Twenty years ago Linevoye Lake was such a wilderness that, according to the foresters, hardly any birds would roost there.

There was a freshness in the air that followed us all day long. Everything—the trunks of the birches and pines, the leaves and grass, the very air, and the water of the forest lakes—shone, shimmered, and radiated this freshness.

"I bet you're surprised?" said Tisha. "Do you remember how dark and murky it was here—and the rankness? Now the wood can breathe freely."

From the hydro-electric station we went on to the White River. Nature there was silent with the special hush of the wilds. Green pines were mirrored in the flowing water. The zoologist, a quiet, serious man, opened the cages and let the beavers out. Before going into the water they spent a long time tidying up; they combed their fur with their claws, paying no attention to us.

"What a well-behaved animal!" cried the driver admiringly. "Doesn't want to dirty the water."

We reached the "Government Ditch" by evening. The foresters lived in several log huts, but

the old cabin was still there, used as a drying-room for pine cones.

Tisha and I sat on the bank of the canal for a while, watching the night spread slowly from the east. Big fish were splashing in the water.

"Breems, I think," said Tisha. "When Grandad Vasily was alive, the only fish here were loaches. You came just in time, when everything is in flower. It's the most beautiful season of all. Have you seen the meadows?"

"No, not yet."

After a moment's pause Tisha said: "There isn't a district here, no matter how small, that hasn't a great future, a very great future. Liza probably told you the story about the treasure—a good heart is treasure, certainly. But as I see it, there is treasure buried in every district, and I wouldn't change ours for any place in the world. It was called poor and swampy, nothing but podsol soil, potatoes and mosquitoes, damp and rotten wood. But look at it now. And the people! Remember how they used to say: 'Sometime,' and 'Not now!'—'That's not for us,'—'That's too big a mouthful for us to chew.' But see how they've changed! They believe in the future, they believe in themselves. I keep hurrying everybody, but everybody hurries me too—'Come on, get going!' is all I hear. People are impatient for the new life—they're eager for everything. They want to build a hydro-electric station, a road to the re-

gional centre and new schools, they want to exploit the peat resources and collect medicinal herbs; they want to bring in new breeds of cattle and plant forests and gardens. Even beehives are included in the plan. So there are a million and one things to be done, although, on the face of it, the district doesn't look like much. But the main thing, of course, is our meadowland. In a couple of days the Regional Committee Secretary is going to the Kremlin to report on the transformation of the Oka floodlands into a centre of dairy produce for Moscow. We held a conference and decided to show the Government our resources and our possibilities, to demonstrate our meadowland as it really is. Just making a report wouldn't do the trick—we want to show what we have. So we're sending to Moscow all the flowers and grasses growing here. Every possible variety—freshly cut, of course."

"But how will you get your freshly cut flowers and grasses to Moscow?"

"By car—in tubs of water. And it won't be mere bouquets of flowers, but whole banks of them."

* * *

Soon afterwards they began collecting the grasses and flowers.

Liza was in charge. She called together the senior schoolchildren, and when I arrived there

were about thirty boys and girls sitting on logs near the school building, arguing hotly about the best meadows for gathering the greatest variety of the largest flowers. Some suggested the bank of the Staritsa, others plumped for Studenets Lake, while others again favoured the mysterious locality of Khvoshchi. The smallest girl there, with a lock of hair tossing on her head as she moved, had an opinion all her own.

"You're all of you quite wrong!" she insisted tearfully. "We must go to the Quiet Ford—you get every kind of flower there."

Of course, flowers should be gathered either in the early morning, before the heat sets in, or before sunset, after the heat has gone; otherwise they wilt quickly.

It was decided to go before sunset, to bring them all to Polyani for sorting, and then send them off that very night to Moscow.

I joined Liza and the children. There were many other grown-ups with us, my driver included.

Each one tried to pick the biggest flower. Each of us thought his find the best.

It was night when we returned from the meadows. The sun had set and mists had settled on the lakes. Landrails screeched over the lowlands.

The wild rose, which comes with the light June nights, was in flower.

In the pure, dimming sky, a jet plane left a white trail which rose swiftly towards the faint star above. This trail and the star were mirrored in the waters of the Staritsa, lending it the depth of the evening sky.

Night shadows lurked in the wild rose bushes on the banks of the lake, but the flowers still flamed with the last glow of sunset. A nightingale sent a faint trill of music into the air and then was silent, afraid of disturbing the evening hush.

The forest was black against the horizon as Jupiter rose and began its slow climb over the meadows, willows and mists—over the land so familiar and so dear to us.

1953

C R O A K Y

(*A Fairy-Tale*)

The hot spell had dragged on for a whole month. Grown-ups said you could even see the heat.

"How can you see the heat?" Tanya kept asking everybody.

Tanya was five, an age when she was learning new things every day. Uncle Gleb was quite right when he said that even if you were to live three hundred years, you wouldn't know everything.

"Come upstairs and I'll show you the heat. You can see it better from there," said Gleb.

Tanya climbed the steep staircase. The attic was full of light but hot under the sun-baked roof. The old maple outside tried so hard to push its branches through the attic windows that it was difficult to close them, and that was probably why they were left wide open all summer.

The attic had a balcony with carved railings. Gleb took Tanya out on the balcony and told her

to look at the meadows beyond the river, and at the distant woods.

"See that yellow wisp of smoke like from a samovar? And the air all quivering? That is the heat. Yes, you can see the heat, and the cold, and anything else you want to."

"The cold is when the snow falls?" asked Tanya.

"Not only then. You can see it in summer too. You just wait, when the days grow cool I'll show you what cold looks like."

"Like what?"

"Well, in the evening the sky is green, like wet grass. The sky is cold then."

But in the meantime it was scorching hot and the one that suffered most from the heat was a little frog which lived in the yard, under an elder bush.

The yard grew so hot in the sun that every small creature went into hiding. Even the ants did not stir from their homes in the earth during the day, but waited patiently for the evening. Only the grasshoppers did not seem to mind the heat. The hotter the day, the higher they hopped and the louder they fiddled. It was impossible to catch them, and the frog learned what it meant to go hungry.

Once it found an opening under the door of the cellar and after that it spent all its days there, drowsing on the cold brick cellar steps.

When Arisha, the housemaid, went down into the cellar to get the milk, the frog would wake up, hop aside and hide behind a cracked flower pot—which always brought a scream from Arisha.

In the evening the frog would creep out into the yard and make its way cautiously to a corner of the flower-bed where the tobacco flowers bloomed in the evening and where the asters grew in close clusters. The flowers were watered every evening and you could breathe properly there—the watered earth was so nice and damp, and cold drops occasionally fell on your head from the white petals of the tobacco plant.

The frog sat in the dark, goggled and waited for people to stop walking about, talking, clattering glasses, and juggling the copper rod on the wash-stand; for them to turn down the lamp wicks and blow them out. Then everything was dark and mysterious.

Only then could you hop about a bit in the flower-bed, nibble at the aster leaves, and gingerly touch a sleeping bumble-bee, listening to its drowsy grumbling.

Then came the hawking and crowing of the cocks, and midnight—the best time of all. Dew might fall, and then the wet grass would twinkle. Night-time, quiet and cool, would go on and on, and the bittern, that unsociable bird, would raise its raucous voice over the meadows.

Uncle Gleb was an inveterate fisherman. Every evening he would remove the table-cloth, slowly empty on to the table different boxes with glittering hooks, round leaden plummets, and transparent, coloured fishing lines, and would start mending his rods. At such times Tanya was not allowed to come up to the table in case a hook would get caught in her finger.

While Gleb was mending his rods he sang into his beard—always the same song:

*There was a jolly fisherman
Who liked his rods to mend
And watch his float abobbing
For many days on end.*

But this was a bad summer for Gleb. Not a worm to be found because of the dry weather. Not even the smartest of the boys could be persuaded to dig for them.

In despair Gleb wrote out a huge sign in white letters on the fence:

"Worms bought here from anyone."

But even that didn't help. People would stop, read the sign, shake their heads and laugh: "How do you like that?" Then they would pass on. And the next day some little rascal wrote underneath, in letters of the same size:

"In exchange for potato jam."

Uncle Gleb had no choice but to rub the whole thing off.

He began to make trips to the ravine, three miles off. There, after an hour of hard digging, he might find a score or so of worms hidden under a heap of chips.

Uncle Gleb took as much care of them as if they had been made of gold: he bedded them in damp moss, covered the worm jar with a bit of cheesecloth and kept the jar in the dark cellar.

It was there that the little frog discovered the worms. He had quite a job pulling the cover off, but once that was done, he crept into the jar and tackled them. He was so absorbed that he never even heard Gleb coming down into the cellar. Gleb caught him by his hind legs and took him up into the yard. There Tanya was feeding an irate purblind hen.

"There," Gleb said menacingly. "With the sweat of your brow you work to dig up a dozen worms, and a shameless frog steals them without the slightest qualm. It even managed to pull the cover off. We'll have to teach it a lesson."

"How?" asked Tanya anxiously, while the hen squinted malignantly at the frog.

"Turn it over to the hen for her dinner, that's how!"

The frog jerked its legs desperately but failed to free itself. The hen ruffled her feathers, flew up and almost tore the frog out of Gleb's hand.

"Don't you dare," Tanya shouted at the hen and burst into tears.

The hen skipped aside and, standing on one leg, waited thoughtfully for further developments.

"Uncle Gleb, don't kill it. Better give it to me."

"So that it can go on stealing?"

"No, I'll put it in a glass jar and feed it. Aren't you sorry for it too?"

"All right!" Gleb assented. "Take it if you must. But I forgive it only for your sake. And because it isn't just an ordinary frog."

"Oh, isn't it?" Tanya stopped crying.

"Don't you see? It's a tree-frog, a croaky. It always forecasts rain."

"Isn't that nice." And Tanya sighed with relief as she rattled off the words she heard Ignat the carpenter say, day in and day out: "We need some rain that bad—or the grain and the vegetables will fail, and then where will we be?"

Tanya put the frog in a jar with grass and set it on the window-sill.

"You should slip a twig into the jar," advised Gleb.

"What for?"

"When the frog climbs up the twig and begins to croak, it's a sign that rain's coming."

But there was no sign of rain. The frog, sitting in its jar, listened to people talking about the drought and kept panting. Life in a jar had, of course, its advantages—it meant safety and a full stomach—but it was rather stuffy.

One night the frog climbed up the maple twig

and out of the jar and with a cautious hop, skip and jump, dropped into the garden. There a swallow had made its nest under the roof of the summer-house.

The frog croaked softly and the swallow stuck its head out of the nest.

"Now what is it?" she asked acidly. "All day long you keep hurrying and scurrying—it's enough to make your head go round. And then there's no rest for the weary even at night."

"You hear me out first, then do your grumbling," answered the frog. "You can't say I ever woke you up before."

"All right, out with it," said the swallow, yawning. "What's the trouble?"

And so the frog told the swallow how the girl Tanya had saved her life, how she had thought and thought of what good turn she could do her. Now, at last, she had found a way, but it all depended on whether the swallow was willing to help.

People were terribly worried because there was no rain, said the frog. Everything was drying up. The grain would wither on the stalk. Even for them, the birds and frogs, hard times had come—there were no more worms or snails.

Now the frog had heard Tanya's father, the agronomist, talk about the drought, and Tanya had cried as she listened. She was so sorry for her father and for all the collective farmers who

were suffering from the drought. The frog had also seen Tanya standing near a withered raspberry bush, had seen her touching the blackened, brittle leaves and crying. The frog had heard Tanya's father say that people would soon find a way to make rain themselves but until they did they must be helped.

"So they must," agreed the swallow. "But how? The rain is far, far away, a great many miles from here. I didn't quite reach it in my flight yesterday, but I saw it—a great pouring rain. Only it'll never get here, it'll rain itself out before it arrives."

"Why not lead it here," the frog pleaded.

"It isn't that easy, you know, and besides, it isn't a swallow's job. It's something for the swifts to do—they fly faster."

"Then you talk to the swifts."

"That's easier said than done. You know what they're like—brush against one of their fledglings by accident and you'll never hear the end of it. They're always spoiling for a fight. Nothing but shrieks, yells, squeaks."

The frog turned away and a tiny tear dropped from its eye into the grass.

"Well, if you swallows can't drive the rain here, there's no point in talking to the swifts," it sobbed.

"What do you mean, we can't?" The swallow flared up. "Who told you that? There's nothing

we can't do. We can even give lightning the slip, and overtake an aeroplane. To drive in the rain is as easy for us as catching midges, but before we could do it we'd have to round up all the swallows, every last one in the region."

The swallow pecked its claws clean and thought hard.

"There! Stop wailing. We'll drive the rain here."

"But when?" asked the frog.

The swallow again set about pruning itself and thinking.

"Let me see. To call in all the swallows will take two hours. To reach the rain clouds we need another two. Coming back with the rain is harder—that will take at least four hours. So you can expect us back by about 10 o'clock in the morning. Well then, cheerio!"

The swallow flew up to the bird-house, gave a chirp, and vanished behind the shingled roofs.

The frog went home. Everybody in the house was fast asleep.

It climbed into the jar, then on to the maple branch and gave a gentle croak. Nobody heard it. Then it croaked louder and still louder and soon all the rooms, and then the garden, resounded with its croaking. All the cocks in the village woke up and cried "cock-a-doodle-doo!" in answer. They did their best to outcrow each other, grew hoarse, lost their voices, regained them,

and as they cock-a-doodled they flapped their wings violently. They made such a racket that everybody woke up, convinced the village was on fire.

"What's the matter?" asked Tanya sleepily.

"It's going to rain. Rain!" came her father's voice from the next room. "Do you hear? Your croaky's calling. And the cocks in all the barnyards have begun to crow. That's a sure sign."

Gleb came into Tanya's room with a candle and went over to the frog's glass house.

"Sure enough. Just as I thought! Croaky is on the branch and clamouring as loudly as she can. She's turned quite green with the strain," said Uncle Gleb.

Morning came, as cloudless as ever. But about ten o'clock, away to the west, the first thunder rumbled over the fields.

The collective farmers went up on the cliff overhanging the river and looked towards the west, shading their eyes with their hands. The children climbed on the roofs. Arisha hurried to put pails and tubs under all the drain pipes. Tanya's father kept running into the yard to scan the sky, listened to the peals and said: "If only it doesn't pass by us—if only we get some of this thunder-storm." Tanya tagged behind and listened too.

The rolls of thunder came nearer, growing in majesty and breadth. A black cloud rode the

western sky. Gleb rushed to collect all his rods and oil his boots. Fish, he declared, would always bite like mad after a thunder-storm.

The fresh air was good to breathe. In the garden the leaves rustled gently: the storm-cloud drew closer, and gleeful lightning ripped open the sky.

The first drop of rain rattled on the iron roof. Then came a deep silence, as if everyone was listening, waiting with bated breath for the fall of the second drop. The rain itself stopped to listen and to decide whether the first drop had fallen on exactly the right spot. Evidently it was satisfied, for all at once thousands of drops broke loose and drummed on the roof. A glistening downpour streamed outside the windows.

"Come up here, hurry!" came Gleb's voice from the attic.

Everybody ran upstairs, with Tanya, of course, at the tail end.

Up there everybody could see thousands, tens of thousands, of little birds driving rain clouds over the earth, keeping them from turning off to the side. An uncountable number of them rushed at the clouds, raising with their wings a wind that drove the clouds farther and farther earthward. The whole cavalcade came rumbling and grumbling towards the dry fields and vegetable gardens.

Some birds on the wing caught rills of water and trailed the transparent threads after them.

Sometimes these birds shook their wings all at once. Then the rain pelted the roof so hard that in the attic they shouted, trying to be heard, but even then nobody could make out a word.

"What is it, a bird rain?" asked Tanya.

"I don't know. Can you make anything of it, Gleb?" asked Tanya's father.

"Not I," said Gleb. "It looks like a world-wide migration of swallows."

When the rain, drumming on the roof, had quietened to an even downpour, and all the swallows had gone, Tanya took the frog out of the jar and put it down in the fresh, rustling garden, where grass and leaves swayed under the slanting rain.

Gently she patted the frog on its cold little head and said:

"Thank you for bringing the rain. You need not be afraid now, nobody will touch you."

The frog looked at Tanya but said nothing, for it could not voice a single word in human language—it could only croak. But its eyes were so full of devotion that Tanya gave it another little pat on the head.

The frog jumped under the leaves of the tobacco plant and began to shiver and shake, which was its way of bathing in the rain.

Since then everybody has been very nice to the frog, and Arisha no longer screams when she sees it, while Gleb sets aside for it a daily portion of the fattest worms from his precious jar.

Meanwhile the rain-washed grain has ripened, the wet flower gardens sparkle in the light, and the vegetable gardens smell deliciously of juicy cucumbers, tomatoes, and the wild fennel. The fish throw themselves so lustily on the bait that every day they swim off with Gleb's treasured gilt hooks.

Tanya romps around the garden, plays hide-and-seek with the frog and gets her dress wet in the dew. Inquisitive spiders drop on invisible threads from their twigs to find the reason for such goings-on and laughter in the garden. Enlightened, they roll their threads up into grey balls no bigger than pinheads, and go to sleep in the warm shade of the leaves.

*In our imagination colours never fade,
summer never ends, and love never dies.
Only in our imagination does the wind
always blow from a land in blossom; and
the sickle of the moon in the sky never wanes.*

*Only in our imagination can we laugh with
Pushkin or clasp the energetic hand of Dick-
ens or find in the clear ice of some frozen
stream the blue flowers that Ophelia dropped.*

*Imagination ripples on the surface of life
as the play of light on the quick waters of
a spring.*

A BASKET OF FIR-CONES

That autumn the composer Edvard Grieg lived in the forest country near Bergen. All forests, full of rustling leaves and the tang of mushrooms, are delightful, but those clinging to the sides of mountains rising out of the sea are especially so. They ring with the noise of the surf, they wrap their trees in sea-mists, and the green moss, thriving in the moist air, hangs beard-like from the branches to the ground. And in these woods lives a merry echo, a mocking-bird, eager to snatch up any sound and send it bouncing over the cliffs.

It was in such a forest that Grieg met a little girl with two plaits down her back, and a basket on her arm. She was gathering fir-cones.

Autumn had come. If one took all the gold and copper in the world and hammered them into a myriad of fine leaves, they would still be an infinitesimal part of the autumnal dress of the

mountains. And no matter how delicate the workmanship, they would seem crude beside nature's handiwork, especially the aspen leaves which tremble in response to the notes of a bird.

"What is your name, little girl?" asked Grieg.

"Dagny Pedersen," came the answer in a voice subdued by shyness rather than fear—she could not possibly have been frightened, for Grieg's eyes twinkled merrily.

"What a shame I haven't a little present for you," cried Grieg. "Not a ribbon, not a doll, nor a velvet rabbit with me."

"I've got an old doll at home," the girl told him. "She used to be Mother's. Her eyes closed like this." And the girl slowly closed her eyes. When she opened them Grieg noticed that they were greenish, and flecked with the gold of the forest leaves.

"Now she sleeps with her eyes open," the girl went on sadly. "Old people don't sleep well. Take my grandad now—he moans and groans all night."

"You know what, Dagny," said Grieg, "I have an idea. I'm going to give you a very nice present. Not now, but in ten years."

"Oh, that's ever so long." Dagny clasped her hands in dismay.

"Yes, but I still have to make it."

"And what will it be?"

"You'll know when the time comes."

"Must it take ten years? Can't you make more than five or six toys in your whole life?" She sounded reproachful.

"That's not it," he answered uncertainly. "It may only take a few days. But it isn't a thing to give little children. My presents are only for grown-ups."

Dagny touched his sleeve pleadingly. "I won't break it, honest I won't. Grandad has a toy boat made of glass. I dust it, and I've never chipped off the tiniest bit."

"This Dagny has certainly got me in a tight corner," thought Grieg and fell back on the usual formula of grown-ups in such cases: "You are still a little girl and there are many things you don't understand yet. Learn to be patient. And now let me take your basket—it's much too heavy for you. I'll walk home with you, and we'll talk about something else."

Dagny sighed, and gave Grieg the basket. It really was heavy, because resinous fir-cones weigh much more than pine-cones.

When they came in sight of the forester's cottage behind the trees, Grieg said: "Well, Dagny, you can walk the rest of the way by yourself. Now then—there are many little Dagny Pedersens in Norway. What is your father's first name?"

"Hagerup," answered Dagny. "Won't you come in?" she asked, wrinkling up her forehead. "We have an embroidered table-cloth, and a red cat,

and a glass boat. Grandad will let you take it in your hands."

"Thank you, but I can't now. Good-bye, Dagny." Grieg stroked the little girl's hair and walked off towards the sea. Dagny followed him with grave eyes under puckered eyebrows. The basket hung crookedly on her arm so that some fir-cones spilled.

"Yes," thought Grieg, "I'll compose something specially for her, and have printed on the title-page: 'To Dagny Pedersen, daughter of forester Hagerup Pedersen, when she reaches the age of eighteen.' "

* * *

Grieg found everything in his house in Bergen as he had left it. All sound-absorbers, such as carpets, curtains, upholstered furniture, had been removed long ago. Only the old sofa remained; it could seat ten visitors at a time and Grieg could not bring himself to part with it. His friends used to say this house was as bare as a woodcutter's hut. The only thing that gave it distinction was the piano.

Within those whitewashed walls a man of imagination could hear enchanting sounds—sometimes the North Sea roaring through the blackness with a whistling wind above it—and sometimes a little girl singing her rag doll to sleep.

Grieg's piano sang as readily about love as about the urge of the human spirit towards new

and great things. The black and white keys, rippling under his fingers, would grieve or laugh, thunder or rage, or else would subside into nothingness.

Then in the silence the last ghost of a note would whisper Cinderella's gentle plaint against her sisters. Grieg, leaning away from the keyboard, would listen until this last sound had floated off to die away in the kitchen, where a cricket had lived these many years. You could hear, too, the dripping of a tap, marking time as regularly as a metronome, each drop insisting that time waits for no man, and therefore what is to be done must be done quickly.

It took Grieg more than a month to compose the music for Dagny Pedersen.

Winter came. Fogs rolled in and swallowed up the houses. Rusty ships from the seven seas lay dozing at the wooden wharves, wheezing steam. Then the snow fell. From his window Grieg could see the flakes falling obliquely and settling on the tree-tops.

One cannot put music into words. Grieg described the joy and charm of girlhood. As he wrote down the notes he saw a girl with shining green eyes running towards him. Delightedly she threw her arms round his neck and pressed her warm cheek against the grey stubble on his face. "Thank you!" she said, although she did not yet know what she was thanking him for.

"You are like the sun, like a gentle breeze in the early morning. Your heart is a white flower, filled with the fragrance of spring," he told her. "I have lived long and seen much of life; and no matter what people say, I know that life is a wonderful and precious thing. I am an old man, but to youth I have always given freely of my work, my talent, my life. And that is why, Dagny, it may be that I am happier than you.

"You are the mysterious half-light of a north-land midsummer night. You are the glow of the dawn. You are happiness, and my heart quivers to the notes of your voice. A blessing on all that your eye sees, on all that your hand touches, on all that makes you happy, on all that makes you thoughtful."

This is what Grieg thought, and his fingers, moving over the keys, recorded these thoughts. He suspected that there were always eavesdroppers about: the tomtits in the trees, tipsy sailors off some ship in the harbour, the washerwoman next door, the cricket, the snowflakes falling from the low sky, and Cinderella in her old frock. Each listened in his own way. The tomtits would twitter excitedly, but their twittering could not drown the voice of the piano. The sailors would sit on doorsteps, sobbing as they listened. The washerwoman would straighten her bent back, brush her reddened eyes with the back of her hand, and shake her head wonderingly. The cricket would

come out of a crack in the tiled stove and take a peep at the music-maker. The snowflakes would linger in the air to dip into the golden ripples of sound pouring from the little house. And Cinderella would look smilingly at the floor where, beside her bare feet, a pair of glass slippers tinkled in time with the chords of Grieg's piano.

Grieg preferred this audience to one of polite, correctly dressed concert-goers.

* * *

When the eighteen-year-old Dagny finished school, her father celebrated the occasion by sending her to his sister Magda in Christiania. Let the child see something of the world and enjoy herself! (Dagny, now a graceful young girl with her flaxen hair done in two heavy plaits, was still "the child" to her father.) Let her see how people lived. Who knew what the future would bring her—perhaps a husband, honest and loving, but rather dull and stingy. Or work in a village shop or in some shipping office in Bergen.

Magda was a dressmaker in a theatre, and Nils, her husband, was a wig-maker. A narrow staircase led to their tiny room just under the roof of the theatre. From their window you could see the monument to Ibsen and the bay alive with the flags of different nations. The ships hooted into the open windows all day long, so that Uncle Nils could tell each ship by its blast—the

Nordernāy from Copenhagen, the *Scottish Bard* from Glasgow, the *Jeanne d'Arc* from Bordeaux.

The little room was cluttered with theatrical bits and pieces—brocade, silk, tulle, ribbons, lace, felt hats with black ostrich feathers, gipsy shawls, grey wigs, thigh-boots with bronze spurs, rapiers, fans and worn silver slippers. All these things had to be mended or patched or cleaned or ironed. On the walls hung pictures cut from books and magazines—courtiers of Louis XIV, beauties in crinolines, cavaliers, Russian women in sarafans, sailors and garlanded vikings. The place always smelt of paint and varnish.

* * *

Dagny went often to the theatre. She enjoyed the performances but she could not sleep after them and would sometimes lie crying in bed.

Aunt Magda worried and would try to soothe her, telling her that she shouldn't take seriously everything she saw on the stage. Uncle Nils, on the other hand, called his wife a cackling old hen and said that if you didn't believe those things, what would be the good of theatres? So Dagny went on believing.

One day Aunt Magda suggested that they go to a concert for a change. Nils raised no objection. Didn't music mirror genius? Nils liked to use high-flown, if rather vague, words. According to him, Dagny was like the opening bars of an over-

ture. And Magda, he declared, had the magic power of transforming people. She made costumes for the theatre, didn't she? And everyone knew that when someone changed his clothes, he became a completely different person. So an actor who yesterday was a murdering villain, would become today a soulful lover, tomorrow a court jester and the day after—a national hero.

"Just listen to this attic philosopher!" Magda would exclaim. "Don't mind him, Dagny, my dear. It's all nonsense—he doesn't know himself what he's talking about."

It was a warm June, the time of the "white nights" of northern countries, and the concert was given in the open air, in a public park. Dagny wanted to put on her only good frock, the white one, but Uncle Nils wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that a beautiful girl should stand out from her surroundings. He made quite a speech which could be summed up as a simple piece of advice: on ordinary nights you should shine forth in white, but on white nights—wear black.

There was no arguing with Uncle Nils and Aunt Magda borrowed for Dagny a black dress of soft silky velvet from the theatre wardrobe. When Dagny put it on, Aunt Magda was forced to admit that for once Nils was right. The dark velvet set off wonderfully Dagny's pale beauty and the gleam of old gold in her long plaits.

"Just look at her!" Nils whispered to Magda.

"She's as beautiful as a girl going to her first tryst."

"Tryst indeed!" muttered Magda. "I remember our first meeting but I can't seem to recall any doting, handsome lover. You're an old windbag, that's what you are!" And she kissed him right on top of his head.

The concert started immediately after sunset, when the old gun had fired its evening shot from the harbour. Neither the conductor nor the members of the orchestra turned on the lights over their music-stands. The night was so light that the lamps among the lime-trees of the park might have been a festive decoration.

This was Dagny's first experience of symphonic music, and it affected her strangely. It sent dream-like pictures chasing through her mind. Suddenly she looked up, startled: could it be her name that the thin man in evening dress, announcing the items on the programme, had called out?

"Did you call me, Uncle?" she asked and frowned as she noticed in his eyes a look that might have been either surprise or admiration. Aunt Magda too stared at her and held a handkerchief to her mouth.

"What is it?" Dagny asked. Magda seized her arm and whispered: "Sh-h! Listen!"

Dagny heard the announcer say: "I'll repeat it for the benefit of people sitting at the back: the

next item is a famous piece by Edvard Grieg, dedicated to 'Dagny Pedersen, daughter of for-ester Hagerup Pedersen, when she reaches the age of eighteen.' "

Dagny took such a deep breath that it hurt her, without helping her to keep back her sobs in any way. She bent and covered her face with her hands.

At first she could hear nothing for the tumult inside her. Then came the sound of a shepherd piping to his flock in the early morning, waking a hundred echoes. The music swelled and roared like wind, going through tree-tops, scattering leaves, stirring the grass and throwing the cool spray of the sea into your face. Why, it was her own forest, her own mountains. She knew that piping so well, and that surf breaking on the beach. She felt calmer.

Glass ships were churning up the water, the wind plucking chords from their rigging. Then, by imperceptible changes, tiny bells rang merrily with the music of lilies of the valley, birds somersaulted in the air, children shouted at play, a girl sang as she was wakened at dawn by her lover throwing pebbles at her window. This was a song that Dagny had heard in her own forest.

So that tall, grey-haired man who carried her basket of fir-cones had been Edvard Grieg, the great magician-musician! She remembered reproaching him for not being able to make things

quickly—and this was the present he had promised her ten years ago.

Dagny was now crying unashamedly, crying in gratitude. The music swelled and filled the space between the earth and the clouds that hung over the town. The waves of sound beat against the clouds, tore them and let the stars shine through.

Now the music no longer sang but sent out a call to enter that land where grief could not threaten love, where no one was robbed of happiness, where the sun shone like the golden crown on a fairy godmother's head. And then, from the sweet medley of sounds came a familiar voice: "You are happiness. You are the glow of dawn."

Silence fell. Slowly, then gathering impetus, a storm of applause broke out. Dagny got up and hurried to the park gates. Everyone turned—perhaps it occurred to some of them that this was the Dagny Pedersen to whom Grieg had dedicated his undying music.

He is dead, thought Dagny. Why should that be? Oh, if only she could see him again, just once. How fast she would run to him, throw her arms round his neck, press her tear-wet cheek against his and say: "Thank you!"

"What are you thanking me for?" he would ask.

"I don't know. For not forgetting me. For

your goodness. For showing me how wonderful life is."

Dagny wandered through the deserted streets, without noticing that Uncle Nils, sent after her by Magda, was following her. He swayed a little, like a drunken man, and kept muttering to himself about a miracle that had happened in their humdrum lives.

The dimness of night still veiled the town, but the first golden streaks of a northern dawn were already reflected in the windows.

Dagny went down to the sea, where the water seemed deeply asleep, with not a ripple to mar its smooth surface. She clasped her hands and caught her breath at the beauty of the world.

As she watched the ships' lights slowly swaying in the greyish water Dagny laughed aloud in delight.

Nils, a little way off, heard that laugh and went home.

"She's all right," he reassured himself. "She'll make something of her life."

D I C K E N S

(From a Writer's Note-Book)

Yellow clouds hang over Feodosiya, sullen, threatening clouds. It is hot. The surf is pounding. Small boys, perched on an old acacia-tree, are stuffing their mouths with its dry, sweet blossoms. Far off on the horizon a wisp of smoke rises from the incoming Odessa boat. A gloomy old fisherman, with a torn piece of fish net for a belt, whistles and spits into the water from sheer boredom. Near him a boy sits reading a book. "Here, young 'un, let's have a look at the book," says the fisherman in his gruff voice. The boy timidly hands over the book. The fisherman begins reading. Five minutes pass, then ten. He snuffles with excitement. "My word, he's sure piled it on."

The boy sits there, waiting. The fisherman has been reading for half an hour. The clouds have moved higher. The small boys have stripped one acacia-tree clean and climbed up another. Still the fisherman reads on. The boy gives him an anx-

ious look. An hour goes by. "Please, Mister," the boy whispers, "I have to go home."

"To your Ma?" the fisherman asks without looking up.

"Yes," the boy says.

"Your Ma can wait," the fisherman growls. The boy is silenced. The fisherman turns the pages hastily, swallowing hard. Another half an hour slips past. The boy begins to cry softly. The ship has come into port and its siren sends out majestic, disinterested blasts. The fisherman hears nothing.

Now the boy is sobbing openly, tears running down his trembling cheeks. The fisherman sees and hears nothing. Then the old pier watchman shouts to him:

"Hey there, Petya! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Stop torturing the child and give him back his book."

The fisherman looks at the boy in surprise, throws the book at him and says disgustedly:

"Here—take it, you snivelling brat. I hope it chokes you!"

The boy grabs the book and runs off along the pier without a backward glance.

"What book was it?" I asked the fisherman.

"Dickens," he said, still vexed. "What a writer—sticky as pitch. You can't tear yourself away."

КОНСТАНТИН ПАУСТОВСКИЙ
БЕГ ВРЕМЕНИ



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